

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
30 September 2018

Numbers 11:25-29
Psalm 19
James 5:1-6
(see John 17:17) Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

At Least We May Love Alike

Four years ago, while I was taking a two-year break from seminary, I had started working again as a structural engineer in Downtown Seattle. Many years before that, before I had ever gone to seminary, I had wanted to do an engineering mission trip, but I never took the opportunity to make it happen. When I left engineering to go to seminary, I thought I had missed my chance.

Now that I was practicing as an engineer again, I realized this was my second chance – and now was the time to go for it. So, I signed up for a two-week mission trip to help design a school building in Cusco, Peru. The former capital of the Incan Empire; a beautiful city located high up in the Andes Mountains.

This trip was truly ecumenical in several ways.¹ In a group of thirteen missionaries, we had: engineers, architects, and construction professionals. We came together from all parts of the United States, as well as Canada, England, and Korea. And we were all Christians from different faith traditions, such as: Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Church of Christ, Four Square, Quaker, etc. (But what really pushed ecumenical boundaries for me was that our group even included an architect who was USC Trojan! (Of course, I'm just kidding! We have many fine parishioners who are Trojans, and I love you all!))

We were quite a diverse group, but I must admit that I felt some hesitation; I felt self-conscious about being the only Catholic in the group. I was worried about whether I would be able to fit in.

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In the months before the trip, I met several times with an experienced structural engineer living near me in Seattle. He had been on several missionary trips to South America, so he taught me about the building codes, construction materials, and typical design methods used in Peru.

Outside of our meetings, we only communicated by e-mail and texting. So, when I saw him calling me on the phone one day, I immediately felt anxious. Before even answering, I knew something was up. He said to me: “Chad, I’ve been praying about you and there’s something important that the Lord wants me to tell you. You should know that the ministry organization you’re going with doesn’t think Catholics are real Christians.”

Whoa! I felt my heart drop. The hesitation and self-consciousness I had been feeling about being the only Catholic in the group suddenly solidified into outright fear and suspicion.

But he continued: “I’m not telling you this to discourage you from going on the trip. I’m telling you, just so you’re prepared. Just in case you hear a comment or experience something on the trip that might offend you. But I also want you to know that I think the organization is wrong about Catholics; and I can assure you that the rest of the missionaries in your group will also think that the organization is wrong.”

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All of a sudden, after months of preparation, less than two weeks before the trip I was thinking about canceling. Evil spirits of distrust, jealousy, division, and making comparisons were tempting me to run away and hide from this opportunity to do good work in the name of God. An opportunity that I had felt called to, discerned, and prayed about for many years. It seemed like all of it was quickly unraveling.

I struggled with thoughts like: Will I be betraying my Church if I go on this trip? Will I be able to talk about being Catholic while I'm there? Will I be able to tell them that I'm discerning being a priest? Will I be allowed to go to Mass when I'm there?

But my friend was insistent: "Chad, you have to go on this trip. Don't hide your faith. Talk to the others about being Catholic. Don't be afraid to go to Mass. Others in the group will want to learn from you and maybe even go to church with you. Chad, go on the trip and simply be yourself!"

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For several months, my friend had been giving me technical preparation to be a structural engineer on this trip. Now, in these last few days, he was giving me spiritual preparation to be a Christian – to be a man of God – on this trip.

He helped me see the spiritual baggage that I had been carrying in my own attitude toward other Christians: fear, suspicion, hesitation, distrust. In any way that I was feeling persecuted for my faith by the organization, with my own attitude and my own reluctance, I was doing the same thing back to them.

But because my friend exposed those evil spirits before the trip, I was better equipped to turn away from them; to reject them; to not bring them with me on the trip. To ask the Lord to purify me of them. To help me rely on His power rather than my own.

Thanks be to God, I went on the trip. Many of the things my friend predicted unfolded in the way he said they would. And it was one of the best trips of my life! One of the richest and most profound ecumenical experience of my life!

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My ecumenical experience is not vast. I'm not an expert on any other religion or Christian denomination. But what I experienced leading up to my mission trip – what all of us have experienced in our own ways – is the ways that evil spirits attack, tempt, and try to disrupt and cause division in God's work.

Divisions and obstacles between good people trying to do good in the name of God have existed since the very beginning. Moses had to ask Joshua: "Are you jealous...?"² Jesus had to instruct John: "Do not prevent [people from doing good deeds in my name]."³

Jealousy, envy, claiming territory, insisting on one's own way, the desire to be 'in' and exclude others, etc. These spirits can tempt us when we're engaging with non-Christians; with fellow Christians; with fellow Catholics; and even within our own parish, our own neighborhoods, families, or homes.

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In order to fight back against these temptations, the Lord asks us to be vigilant – and even drastic – in continually rejecting these evil spirits; in continually asking Him to purify us. It's not a gentle process. We must "cut off" that which causes us to sin.⁴ Oftentimes, what needs to be cut off is a bad attitude, a prejudice, a judgment, or a resentment that we've become attached to; that we've become comfortable with.

This spiritual process might be as difficult or as painful as cutting off a hand or a foot, or plucking out an eye.⁵ It's because when we get too attached to or too comfortable with these attitudes, prejudices, judgments, resentments – it can be hard to imagine things any other way. We become blind to them. They might start to feel as natural to us as our own hand, foot, or eye.

But it is essential to cut them off. It's essential because these attachments weigh us down like a great millstone around our necks.⁶ They inhibit the good works of God that all of us truly want to be a part of, and that all of us want to see happening in this world.

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So, where do we start? Today's Psalm encourages us to start with ourselves, by praying:

Cleanse me from my *unknown* faults!
From [arrogant] sin especially, restrain your servant;
let it not rule over me.⁷

As Jesus said to John, rather than looking for ways that another might be against us, do the opposite. Look for ways that other people are "*not* against us", that is, look for ways that other people are "for us."⁸ Let that attitude be our starting point for relationships with others.

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I conclude this morning with wisdom from John Wesley. He was an Anglican minister in England in the 18th Century. He founded the Methodist movement within the Anglican Church. He was someone who experienced how harmful these divisions can be in preventing good people from doing good work in the name of God. In 1749, he wrote the beautiful *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, in which he made the following proposal:

"...if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike."⁹ At least we may *love* alike. That's a big deal, to be able to *love* alike.

And when we *love* alike, rather than looking for divisions; rather than being jealous or preventing people from doing good works – we are better able "to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the kingdom."¹⁰

¹ From *Catholic Dictionary* (www.catholicculture.org):

Ecumenical: Literally "universal" and commonly used to identify the general councils of the Church. With the rise of the movement for Christian unity, it has become synonymous with "striving for reunification" among the separated Churches of Christendom. (Etym. Latin *oecumenicus*; from the Greek *oikoumen*: the inhabited world.)

² Numbers 11:29

³ Mark 9:39

⁴ Mark 9:43, 45, 47

⁵ Mark 9:43, 45, 47

⁶ Mark 9:42

⁷ Psalm 19:13-14

⁸ Mark 9:40

⁹ John Wesley, *Letter to a Roman Catholic* 16

¹⁰ Wesley 17